

Biblical Echoes

in Reverend Shegog's Easter Sermon *

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The opening lines of the final section "April Eight, 1928," of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*^[1] give the reader an impression entirely different from the one the reader receives when reading the opening lines of the first three sections of this work. Instead of being thrust into the subjective and perplexed interior monologues of Benjy, Quentin and Jason that, respectively, open the first three sections, the reader is decidedly relieved to read the objective language Faulkner employs to describe the dawn of April Eighth, Easter Sunday of 1928. The initial impression in the opening lines of each section seems to continue throughout the substratum of each section. While we feel like descending into "the vortex of time, a vortex created by an event that disturbs, upsets, alarms, or frightens the family or community"^[2] when reading the first three sections, we feel alleviated to be given "the perspective of Dilsey, the one person in the novel with the instructive wisdom to understand the complexities that lay behind and that lie ahead of [the girl Quentin's theft of Jason's cache of money]."^[3]

As Cleanth Brooks explains in *William Faulkner: First Encounters*^[4], Benjy is living "in a virtual present," mixing up and making no distinction between the past and the present; Quentin sees no future for his life and "lives in the past," and Jason, having repudiated the past, "lives only in the future." What puts Dilsey "in a special position to time" is her faith. Dilsey maintains a special position compared to the other three narrators precisely because her "time includes the concept of eternity." Brooks further insists that

she believes in an eternal order, and so the failures of the past, the daily disappointments, and her own meager prospects for the future, do not daunt her. Dilsey believes that goodness will prevail in time or, rather, in a realm outside time. She knows, then, what time is worth and what

it is not worth, and so can properly evaluate time.^[5]

Precisely because she believes in the eternal order and is not daunted by the past, the present or the future, she is able to state that she “seed de first en de last” (297), and “seed de beginnin, en now [she] sees de endin” (297). Dilsey’s statement is a powerful confession of the Christian faith of which she has achieved a deeper understanding, after having listened to Reverend Shegog’s Easter sermon on April 8, 1928. In order to fully appreciate the significance of her statement, it will be helpful to examine Reverend Shegog’s sermon from the viewpoint of the biblical allusions, or more exactly, the biblical sources Reverend Shegog employs in his sermon, and clarify how closely and faithfully Reverend Shegog delineates the whole history of salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in his sermon.

The whole body of Reverend Shegog’s sermon consists of six segments and, in what follows, I will, for convenience’s sake, reproduce the whole text, omitting descriptive parts, grouping each segment under Roman numerals, and underlining passages to be commented on with alphabetic characters.

[Segment I]

Brethren and sisteren, I got [A]the recollection and the blood of the Lamb (294)!

Breddren en sistuhn! I got [B]de ricklickshun en de blood of de Lamb (295)!

Segment I serves as both an invocation to the congregation and a thematic introduction to that day’s sermon, I-B being a “dialect” version of I-A. The main purport of this segment lies in the fact that “the Lamb” points to Christ as the Savior. The idea of identifying Christ with the Lamb should be traced back to one of the so-called messianic prophecies of Isaiah in the Old Testament: “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter” (Isaiah, 53: 7). This prophecy is believed to have been realized in the Passion of Christ when he was treated cruelly and was finally crucified. In the New Testament, at the

scene of Christ being baptized, John the Baptist refers to Christ as “the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (Jn. 1: 29), completing the interpenetration of Christ the Savior with the oppressed messianic figure in Isaiah’s prophecy.

Furthermore, “the blood of the Lamb” triggers a chain of associations in listeners’ mind, i. e., “the Paschal Lamb” in the Old Testament and “the Last Supper ” in the New Testament.

In order to force Pharaoh to allow the Israelites to leave the land of Egypt, Yahweh sends ten plagues to the Egyptians, the last of which is the destroyer who will kill all the firstborn. Yahweh tells Moses to institute the paschal sacrifice that will save the Israelites from the hands of the destroyer:

And the Lord spake unto Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying, ... In the tenth day of this month they shall take to them every man a lamb.... Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male of the first year: ... And the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it in the evening. And they shall take of the blood, and strike it on the two side posts and on the upper door post of the houses, wherein they shall eat it. (Exodus, 12: 1-7)

Moses, in return, calls for all the elders of Israel, and says to them,

Draw out and take you a lamb according to your families, and kill the passover. And you shall take a bunch of hyssop, and dip it in the blood that is in the bason, and strike the lintel and the two side posts with the blood that is in the bason; and none of you shall go out at the door of his house until the morning. For the Lord will pass through to smite the Egyptians; and when he seeth the blood upon the lintel, and on the two side posts, the Lord will pass over the door, and will not suffer the destroyer to come in unto your houses to smite you.... And it shall come to pass, when your children shall say unto you, What mean ye by this service? That ye shall say, It is the sacrifice of the Lord’s passover, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when he smote the Egyptians, and delivered our houses. (Exodus, 12: 21-27)

According to the Synoptic Gospels, while celebrating the Passover with his disciples on the day before his crucifixion, Christ institutes the Eucharist, and at the same time, establishes the New Testament that is to replace the Old Testament, through his own blood:

And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat this is my body. And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, drink ye all of it; for this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. (Mt. 26: 26-28) ^[6]

We cannot find the word "recollection" of Segment I in the Bible. The word that is closest to "recollection" in meaning is the word "remembrance" that Luke uses in his recording of the Last Supper: "This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me" (Lk. 22: 19). ^[7]

So far we have been investigating the biblical meanings associated with the concept of "the blood of the Lamb." We can clearly see that these first words uttered by Reverend Shegog epitomize the theology of salvation, which is foreshadowed in the Old Testament and fulfilled in the New Testament. These words are nothing short of the reverberating theme of Reverend Shegog's Easter sermon.

[Segment II]

When de long, cold.... Oh, I tells you, breddren, when de long, cold.... [A] I sees de light en I sees de word, po sinner! [B] Dey passed away in Egypt, de swinging chariots; de generations passed away. Wus a rich man: whar he now, O breddren? Wus a po man; whar he now, O sistuhn? Oh I tell you, ef [C] you aint got de milk en dew of de old salvation when de long, cold years rolls away! (295)

II-A obviously is echoing the opening lines of John's Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God.... In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. (Jn. 1: 1-5)

These verses are said to recall the account of the creation of the universe in the Book of Genesis: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.... And God said, Let there be light: and there was light" (Gen. 1: 1-3). Just as the Word of God is shown to have the creative power in Genesis, John shows the Word to be the source of life in his Gospel. The light is given to men in order that those who have received the life of the Word may walk in that light.

II-B obliquely refers to the famous episode of the crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelites with Moses as their leader. When the Israelites are pursued by Pharaoh's charioteers, Yahweh delivers the Israelites by drowning the Egyptians:

And the Lord said unto Moses, Stretch out thine hand over the sea, that the waters may come again upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots, and upon their horsemen. And Moses stretched forth his hand over the sea.... And the waters returned, and covered the chariots, and the horsemen, and all the host of Pharaoh that came into the sea after them; there remained not so much as one of them. (Ex. 14: 26-28)

This crossing of the Red Sea is interpreted as a type of salvation through water, thereby, foreshadowing the institution of baptism through water by John the Baptist in the New Testament. The latter half of II-B seems to echo, though faintly, the Ecclesiast who says, "One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh" (Eccles. 1: 4), which is followed by a simple but persuasive paraphrase by Reverend Shegog.

Although II-C is included in an if-clause, it expressly refers to Yahweh's promise to Moses: "I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt unto the land of the Canaanites, ...unto a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex. 3: 17), which promise was to be partly fulfilled in Sinai, when "in the morning the dew lay round about the host" (Ex. 16: 13), and the Israelites were saved from starving.

[Segment III]

I tells you, breddren, en I tells you, sistuhn, dey'll come a time. Po sinner sayin Let me lay down wid de Lawd, lemme lay down my load.

Den whut Jesus g'wine say, O breddren? O sistuhn? [A] Is you got de ricklickshun en de Blood of de Lamb? Case I aint gwine load down heaven! (295)

In Segment III-A, the thematic refrain is repeated in a form of Jesus' answer to a poor sinner who wants to lay down his load with Jesus. Reverend Shegog implies that a sinner must have "de ricklickshun en de Blood of de Lamb" as a kind of prerequisite he must fulfill before laying down his load. Moreover, it can be assumed that, throughout this segment, Reverend Shegog is cognizant of Jesus' consoling words recorded by Matthew: "Come unto me, all that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mt. 11: 28).

[Segment IV]

Breddren! Look at them little chillen sittin dar. Jesus wus like dat once. He mammy suffered de glory en de pangs. Sometime maybe she helt him the nightfall, whilst de angels singin him to sleep; maybe she look out de do en see de Roman po-lice passin. Listen, breddren! I sees de day. Ma'y settin in de do wid Jesus on her lap, de little Jesus. Like dem chillen dar, de little Jesus. I hears de angels singin de peaceful songs en de glory; I sees de closin eyes; sees Mary jump up, sees de sojer face: we gwine to kill! We gwine to kill! We gwine to kill yo little Jesus! I hears de weeping en de lamentation of de po mammy widout de salvation en de word of God! (296)

In Segment IV, Reverend Shegog first draws the congregation's attention to little children sitting in the church, and depicts images of Little Jesus and Mary spending a quiet and peaceful time together. However, the Roman police patrolling on the street in the middle of the segment suddenly emerge as Roman soldiers threatening to kill Mary's little Jesus towards the end of this segment. Although Reverend Shegog is obviously fictionalizing most of this segment, his narrative technique is so skillful and effective that the passage appeals to the audience's emotions and, at the same time, prepares the audience for the following scene of Jesus' crucifixion on Calvary.

[Segment V]

I sees hit, breddren! I sees hit! Sees de blasting, blinding sight! I sees Calvary, wid de sacred trees, sees [A] de thief and de murderer en de least of dese; I hears de boastin en de braggin: Ef you be Jesus, lif up yo tree en walk! I hears [B] de wailin of women en de evening lamentations; I hears de weepin en de cryin en [C] de turnt-away face of God: dey done kilt Jesus; dey done kilt my Son! (296)

With Segment V, Reverend Shegog begins unfolding “the blasting, blinding sight” of the crucifixion on Calvary. In V-A, Reverend Shegog presents a slightly altered or fabricated version of the crucifixion recorded in the synoptic gospels. Jesus is not alone when he is crucified as “then were there two thieves crucified with him, one on the right hand, and another on the left” (Mt. 27:38, see also Mk. 15: 27, and Lk. 23: 33). Once Jesus is crucified, many people around the cross start “boasting” and “bragging”. No one uses the exact phrasing Reverend Shegog uses, but all their sayings ridicule the now helpless Jesus who used to say he could save the world: “And they that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads, and saying, ...If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross” (Mt. 27: 39-40; see also Mk. 15:29-30). Even the chief priest, with the scribes and elders, mock Jesus on the cross, saying, “He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him” (Mt. 27: 42; see also Mk. 15: 31).

As for V-B, Reverend Shegog cannot possibly omit the wailing and lamentations of women from the crucifixion scene because of their emotive effect. However, in order to find their source, we have to go a little further back to the description of Jesus carrying the cross on his way to Calvary: “And there followed him a great company of people, and of women, which also bewailed and lamented him” (Lk. 23: 27).

When Reverend Shegog mentions “de turnt-away face of God” in V-C, he is alluding to the enigmatic words of Jesus uttered on the cross: “My god, my God, why hast thou forsaken me (Mt. 27: 46)?” Jesus’ words refer back to Psalm 22: 1 here, and they seem to express a kind of despair on his part, but in them is recognized his confidence in God in spite of profound suffering.[8] However, Reverend Shegog places far more emphasis on the emotional aspect of God the Father’s sorrow over having his Son killed on

the cross.

[Segment VI]

O blind sinner! Breddren, I tells you; I says to you, when de Lawd did turn His mighty face, say, Aint gwine overload heaven! I can see de widowed God shet His do; I sees de whelmin flood roll between; I sees de darkness en de death everlastin upon de generations. Den, lo! Breddren! Yes, breddren! Whut I see? Whut I see, O sinner? I sees de resurrection en de light; sees de meek Jesus sayin Dey kilt me dat ye shall live again; I died dat [A] dem whut sees en believes shall never die. Breddren, O breddren! [B] I sees de doom crack en de golden horns shoutin down de glory en [C] de arisen dead whut got de blood en de ricklickshun of de Lamb! (297)

Segment VI concludes Reverend Shegog's Easter sermon. In the first half of this segment, Reverend Shegog presents rather dark, negative, and unpromising images of the Lord turning his face, not willing to let many people through the gate of heaven, with darkness and death still prevailing over generations of people. In the latter half, however, the minister presents bright, positive, and hopeful images of Christ resurrecting those who believe in him. Christ's redemptive work culminates in the rising of all the dead on the Day of Judgment, the day of the final fulfillment of eschatology.

Segment VI-A partially repeats Jesus' declaration to Martha, whose brother, Lazarus, was raised to life after he had been dead for four days: "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die" (Jn. 11: 25, 26).

A distant source for Segment VI-B can be found in the description of the end of the world by Jesus himself: "they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet" (Mt. 24: 30, 31).

Segment VI-C contains the theme of all the dead rising at the Second Coming of Christ, and although it is impossible to justify the resurrection of all the dead with a single quotation from the Bible, we may perhaps refer to

St. Paul's explanation of the mysterious transfiguration that will take place both for those newly raised from the dead and for those who are still alive on the Last Day. St. Paul writes:

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord (1 Th. 4: 16, 17).

It is only natural that, for Reverend Shegog, those deemed to be raised should be those who have "got de blood, en de ricklickshun of de Lamb." This phrase appropriately brings Reverend Shegog's Easter sermon to its close.

* This article owes a great deal to, and heavily relies on Professor K. Ohashi's scholarly annotation in Eichosha Commentary Booklet Series on Penguin edition of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, annotated with an introduction by Kenzaburo Ohashi (Tokyo: Eichosha Shinsha, 1976).

Notes

- [1] William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, New, Corrected edition (New York: Random House, 1984). This edition will be quoted throughout this study, and is cited parenthetically within the text of this study.
- [2] James Miller, *Quest Surd and Absurd: Essays in American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1967]), p.53.
- [3] *Ibid.*, p.54.
- [4] Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: First Encounters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p.71.
- [5] *Loc. cit.*
- [6] See also Mk. 14: 22-24, and Lk. 22: 19-20.
- [7] St. Paul also uses the same word in his version of the description of the Last Supper: "And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me." (1 Cor. 11:24)
- [8] A. Jones, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ according to St Matthew," XXVII, 46, in *A Catholic Commentary of Holy Scripture*, ed. by Dom Bernard Orchard *et al.* (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons 1953), p.903.